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ABSTRACT

Differences in culture, language, and educational setting contribute to the difficulties Navajo children experience in learning to read English. In Kenneth Goodman's latest research, examining the reading behavior of eight groups of children (four speaking a rural dialect and four for whom English is a second language), the Navajo children showed the least receptive control of English. Examples of research situations in which these children responded to post-story-reading questions show that teachers must be aware of Navajo children's language interferences, must be patient and persistent, and must know how to involve the children in more language activities. (JM)

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WHEN NAVAJO CHILDREN READ ENGLISH

OR

THE TEACHERS' LAST STAND

Symposia: "Looking at the Reading of Bilingual and Dialect Populations and Implications for Classroom Instruction"
Thursday, May 13, 1976

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INTRODUCTION

The place is the Navajo Reservation in northern Arizona. The time is 1976, and yet, as one visits the Reservation, there is a feeling of isolation from the mainstream of American life.

Diné, The People, as the Navajo call themselves, are seeking their place in the broader American culture. However, significant differences exist between the Navajo culture and the dominant American culture. These differences affect the educational practices we have come to know as "American Education." For example, most Navajos tend to live in small family groups spread out over the Reservation. Because of this continuing isolation from larger communities, the boarding school concept predominates the educational scene.

A visitor to a boarding school would see the ingredients of a typical American school, children and teachers, but here the similarity ends. Observing the children in the halls, at play, and in their dormitories, we hear Navajo spoken. In the classrooms, English is spoken by both teachers and children, and we frequently hear the teacher tell a child, "Say it in English." Thus, the language of instruction is English. For a Navajo-speaking child entering school, then, he or she can be expected to have some problems in learning to read due to cultural and linguistic factors. When the teacher comes from a different culture and speaks only English, the problems of learning to read are compounded.

As a second language learner, we can predict that when a Navajo child reads, the first language will interfere with the second. This

language interference can be observed in the reading process through the use of Miscue Analysis, developed by Kenneth Goodman.

THE READING PROCESS

In his research, Goodman discovered that all readers make miscues when they read. By analyzing these miscues, where the observed response of the reader does not match the expected response of the text, it became clear that the reader was processing print as language rather than making random errors. "Miscue analysis then is rooted in a psycholinguistic view of reading (one that sees thought and language interacting)." (Goodman, 1973)

In order to reconstruct the author's message, to get to the meaning intended, the reader uses graphic, phonological, syntactic, and semantic information. This is true for all readers. In the case of Navajo children reading English, we can expect some problems as they process language to get to meaning due to their experiential background and linguistic differences.

Buck (1973) has outlined problem areas for second language learners when they read English. These areas are discussed in terms of (1) the reader's input (what he brings to the reading process); (2) the author's input (the cues from which the reader must select); and (3) the reading process itself (the interaction of both the reader's input and the author's input. The following diagram has been modified somewhat due to the terminology used by the author. The author's terms native and non-native have been replaced with the terms English and Navajo.

The Reader's Input

English	Navajo
1. Competence in the English language.	1. Control over English syntax may range from zero to full ; vocabulary may range from zero to almost full.
2. Personal experiences within the culture.	2. Different personal experiences within a different culture.
3. Conceptual development.	3. Different conceptual development

The Author's Input

1. Graphophonic cues	1. Unfamiliarity and/or Navajo language interference in interpreting graphophonic cues.
2. Syntactic cues	2. Unfamiliarity and/or Navajo language interference in interpreting syntactic cues.
3. Semantic cues	3. Unfamiliarity and/or Navajo language interference in interpreting semantic cues.

The reading process, as explained here, involves: (1)sampling graphic, syntactic, and semantic cues; (2) predicting both structure and meaning on the basis of these selected cues; (3) testing the prediction; and (4) either confirming that prediction or correcting if

necessary. When placed in a diagram for Navajo speakers, the reading process can be viewed in this way:

The Process

English	Navajo
1. Sampling	1. May not know where information is stored, which language units carry the most information.
2. Predicting	2. May be unable to predict structure and meaning, or may predict on basis of Navajo language structure.
3. Testing	3. May not be able to answer the questions "Does it sound like English? Does it make sense?"
4. Confirming	4. May be unable to confirm or may wrongly confirm out of unfamiliarity and/or Navajo language interference.
5. Correcting when necessary.	5. May not recognize miscue, may not know how to correct miscue.

Research Results

In his latest research, Goodman has examined the reading behavior of eight groups of children, four groups who speak a rural dialect of

English, and four groups who speak English as their second language. Navajo children comprise one of the second language groups.

It has become evident from the research that the Navajo children are the poorest readers of all the second language groups.

From working with the children and observing them in classroom situations, it appears that their poor reading performance is due in part to their receptive control of English. The control is variable, but of all the second language groups in the research, the Navajos have the least receptive control of English. One reason for this is, we feel, that the Navajos have the least interactive relationship with English.

To illustrate the language interference at work with Navajo children reading, we will look at evidence from the research. After the children have read a story orally, they are asked to tell everything they remember reading. This "unaided retelling" is followed by open ended questions from the researcher. The child is given no additional information about the story. The questions are based only on what the child has said. For example, if a child has mentioned a specific character, a typical question is, "Tell me more about _____." Many responses are followed with "why" and "how" questions to elicit as much information as possible from the reader.

The researchers who worked with the Navajo children were well trained and experienced in the retelling situation. However, some interesting and unexpected things happened with the Navajos that have

implications for teachers who work with Navajo children.

When a Navajo child is learning English, we can expect confusion between the pronouns he and she. This is due to the fact that there is no gender in Navajo verbs so youngsters will use he and she interchangeably or will substitute he for she. In the basal text story, "Freddie Miller", used in the research, Freddie gets into trouble doing chemistry experiments but redeems himself by rescuing his sister from being locked in the closet. The following examples illustrate the pronominal confusion (in the examples, S refers to the child and R the researcher):

S: To help her sister. (It should be his sister.)

R: Do you remember how he helped his sister?

S: . . . her sister was yelling. He made the flashlight. He help her sister with it.

In another story about a boy and his father, we get the same thing:

R: What did his father do?

S: She was . . . he was trying to rope the black horse.

A second area of language interference is sentence order. English has the pattern of subject-verb-object. Navajo, though, has a subject-object-verb pattern. This is clearly shown in a retelling of the story Salt Boy, a culturally relevant story used in the research. Briefly, the story is about a Navajo boy who wants his father to teach him how to rope a black horse. Here is part of a child's retelling:

S: He tried to learn how to rope.

R: Who tried to learn how to rope?

S: The black horse.

R: The black horse was going to rope?

S: Yes.

R: Who was the black horse going to rope?

S: Salt Boy.

R: Salt Boy. The horse was going to rope the boy?

S: No.

R: No?

S: The boy was going to rope the horse.

The implications for teachers of Navajos are evident from the previous examples. First, the teachers must be aware of the kinds of language interference they can expect when Navajos read English. Second, in trying to obtain retellings from Navajo children, the teachers must be patient and persistent. As soon as the Navajo child mentioned above, implied in her retelling that the horse was going to learn how to rope, an unknowing teacher might assume that the child was totally confused and did not understand the story. However, because the researcher pursued with further questions, it became clear that the child did, in fact, understand the situation.

It has already been mentioned that the researchers were well trained in obtaining retellings from children. In the case of the Navajo children, the researchers had been extremely patient, too, in waiting for the childrens' responses. However, it soon became clear from listening to the tape recorded retellings that the Navajo children were frustrating the researchers. This was due not to the responses the children gave, but rather to their non-responses. After the researcher asked a question, there would be long silences. The result was a series of questions from the researcher, the final question requiring a yes or no answer from the child. Unknowingly, the child had maneu-

vered the researcher into a corner. These examples illustrate the process:

R: Ok. What was Andrew's brother doing in the story? What did he do in the story? Besides trade the baby, what else did he do in the story? Was he kind?

S: Yes.

R: And what did he do to his brother? What did he do to the baby . . besides trade him? Did he do anything else in the story?

S: Yes.

R: What did he do. How old was Andrew's brother? How old do you think he was?

S: Eleven.

The above section comes from the retelling of a sixth grader. In examining all of the retellings, though, the same thing happened with different children at different grade levels and with different researchers.

The educational implications from this research are clear. Teachers of Navajo children must not only be aware of language interferences but should also be aware of how to involve the children in more language activities. The cultural and conceptual background of the children play a part in their education but only through honest communication between teacher and child can these differences b overcome.

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